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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

Timothy E. Gregory
**A History of
Byzantium**

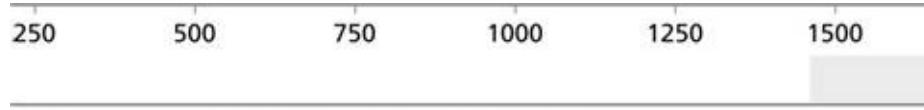
Second Edition

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Byzantium after the Fall of the City



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|---------------------|--|
| 1461 | End of the Empire of Trebizond |
| 1553–1617 | Vincenzos Kornaros, author of <i>Erotokritos</i> |
| 19th century | Revolutions against Ottoman Empire, establishment of Byzantine successor states in the Balkans |

One may say that the Byzantine Empire ended on May 29, 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. On the other hand, several Byzantine political entities survived the catastrophe and, certainly more important, the Byzantine ideal and Byzantine cultural traditions lived on and are still with us today.

The Byzantine Survivor States

The Despotate of the Morea survived the fall of Constantinople only because it was distant, and the sultan did not immediately turn his attention there. The brothers Thomas and Demetrios Palaiologos, who ruled in different parts of the Peloponnesos, fell once again to quarreling, with Thomas still hoping for aid from the West and Demetrios willing to call in the Turks against his brother. Mehmed finally decided to take action himself and in 1460 he set out for the Morea. Demetrios surrendered at once, exactly seven years after the capture of Constantinople; Thomas held out a little longer, but he fled to Italy before the end of the year, and the Despotate of the Morea ceased to exist. Thomas was the only member of his family to have heirs, and Palaiologoi descended from

Box 16.1 The Emperor Turned to Marble

Many signs and prodigies preceded the fall of Constantinople in 1453, including most spectacularly a lunar eclipse which took place only a few days before the event. In addition, there were many predictions that, despite the desperate situation of the empire after the appearance of the Ottomans in Europe in 1354, the city would be saved by divine intervention. According to one of these predictions, the Turks would enter the city, slaying the “Romans” as they advanced. They would reach the Column of Constantine in the center of the city, but at that moment an angel would descend and give a sword to a mysterious unknown individual, saying “Take this sword and avenge the people of the Lord!” The course of the battle would then change and the Byzantines would drive the Turks from the city, pursuing them as far as a place called the “Red Apple Tree” on the borders of Persia. Of course, the situation turned out rather different from the prophecy.

Many of the Orthodox people of the Balkans and Asia Minor, however, continued to believe that the Byzantine Empire would be resurrected. Based on popular traditions and passages from the Old Testament (such as the prophecies of Daniel), stories began to circulate about this awaited event. According to one:

And again, Five-hilled City [Constantinople] you will rule. Many indeed look at the dead and completely plundered [city], But no one actually sees That you will appear as if [awakening] from sleep And you will hold the scepter of this empire.

One of the most popular of these stories had to do with Constantine IX Palaiologos as the “emperor turned to stone.” According to this tradition, the body of the last emperor was never found after the end of the siege in 1453. This was explained by the theory that he was not in fact killed in the battle but that an angel turned him to marble and hid him in a cave close to the Golden Gate of Constantinople, where he was to remain until the time the angel returned and restored his body to human form. Constantine would then enter the city through the Golden Gate, the entrance that previous emperors had always used when they returned to celebrate a victory in war, and he would drive the Turks as far as the Red Apple Tree. In one account:

O emperor Constantine, what happened to you? Some say that you died with your sword in your hand. I heard others say that you were drawn out By the all-holy right hand of God. May you be alive and unburied.

The fall of Constantinople made an enormous impression on all the people of the East and similar prophecies circulated, interestingly enough, among the Arabs and the Turks, not to speak of the Slavic Orthodox Christians. According to a Russian version of the story, a “blond people” would join with the survivors of the Byzantines to defeat the Turks. These blond people were originally thought to be probably the western Europeans but, from at least the beginning of the sixteenth century, they were normally identified with the Russians. Other details were commonly provided which focused on the idea of time stopping when the city fell, with the eventual restoration of the rightful Byzantine state to take place at the proper moment. Thus, one very well-known story about the priests of Hagia Sophia tells of how they melted into the core of the building when the Turks broke into the sanctuary, from which they will emerge once more, still singing the words of the interrupted liturgy. Similarly, another story tells of a monk who, when the city fell, was frying a fish, the cooking of which will be completed only when the Christians again take control of Constantinople.

Such stories, of course, provided hope to the defeated people of Byzantium and their descendants, but they may also have engendered false hopes and dangerous military adventures over the centuries. In any case, it is clear that not everyone believed in these prophecies. Thus, in 1618

Matthew Myreon could write, sarcastically:

We hope in the “blond people” to save us, To come from Moscow to free us. We put our hope in the oracles, in the false prophecies, And we waste our time in worthless words.

FURTHER READING

Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*. Austin, TX, 1982.

him continued to live on in the West, occasionally surfacing to raise a hollow claim to the throne of Byzantium.

Meanwhile, as we have already mentioned, the so-called Empire of Trebizond continued to exist on the southern shores of the Black Sea in eastern Asia Minor. This tiny state, it will be remembered, had come into existence just before the Fourth Crusade and it maintained its independence from the Latins, the Turks, and the resurgent power of the Empire of Nicaea in the thirteenth century. The territory of this state was a small coastal strip, protected from the great powers of Asia Minor by the defenses of the city of Trebizond and the great wall of the Pontic Mountains. Thus, up until the middle of the fifteenth century Trebizond protected its independence against the Ottomans. Murad II had ambitions to capture it, but these were foiled by the diplomatic maneuvers of the emperor John IV Komnenos (1429–59/60). After the fall of Constantinople, John IV made alliances with his neighbors, especially the White Sheep Turkomans (Ak Koyunlu, a Turkic group that had been in Asia Minor since the early fourteenth century and had significant relations with the Byzantines before 1453), but he died before the attack finally came and was succeeded by his brother David Komnenos. David’s diplomatic ambitions were even wider than those of his brother, and he made contacts with the duke of Burgundy and the pope, discussing even the possibility of a new crusade to liberate Jerusalem. David approached Mehmed II with a request for the remission of tribute paid by his brother, and this, along with the web of alliances that the Empire of Trebizond had built up, caused the sultan to move. In the winter of 1460 he put together an enormous expeditionary force, numbering 60,000 cavalry and 80,000 infantry. Supported by the Ottoman fleet in the Black Sea, this force marched to eastern Asia Minor, took Sinope, and made a demonstration of force in Armenia before descending into the territory of Trebizond. There was no alternative to surrender, and on August 15, 1461, the last Byzantine state ceased to exist. The emperor David and his family were taken to Adrianople and initially treated well, but the sultan could not allow the line of the Grand Komnenoi to exist, and in 1463 he

ordered them all to be executed.

The Italian maritime republics, as usual, made the best of the situation after the fall of Constantinople. As we have seen, they had already made trading agreements with the Ottomans and they sought primarily to maintain their economic presence in the East. Venice, which had invested significantly in its eastern outposts, preserved them the longest. The Venetians' foremost concern, of course, was to preserve the naval way-stations from Venice to Constantinople and the Levant, but they also had many land-based territories in Greece. Indeed, Venice remained the primary rival of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean until the dissolution of the republic in 1797. Many of the Venetian territories were not originally held directly but were given to Venetian adventurers under the loose authority of the state, but the tendency as time went by was for Venice to assert direct sovereignty in territories still ruled by the Serene Republic. In central Greece Euboia (Negroponte) fell to the Turks in 1470 and Nafpaktos (Lepanto) in 1499, while in the Peloponnesos Korone and Methone (Coron and Modon) were held by the Venetians until 1500 and Monemvasia until 1540. Of the great islands, Cyprus remained a Venetian possession until 1571 and Crete until 1669; the Ionian islands had an everchanging fate, but overall they remained in Venetian control until the end of the republic. Especially important, although ephemeral, was the Venetian reconquest of southern Greece, which lasted from 1686 to 1715.

Genoa, Venice's main rival in the commercial setting of the later Byzantine Empire, lost its holdings somewhat earlier. The Genoese kept Lesvos until 1462 and Chios until 1566, although as Turkish vassals, and the duchy of Naxos in the Cyclades (then in the hands of a Veronese family) was extinguished in the same year.

Byzantine Christians under Ottoman Rule

Needless to say, the Christian communities of the former empire continued to exist, both in Asia Minor and the Balkans, in part because Islam required the Ottomans to recognize the Byzantine Christians as a legitimate entity, following a religion of the book. For them, the most important event was Mehmed's decision to recognize the patriarch of Constantinople as the head of the *milleti rum*, as the community of Greek-speaking Orthodox was known. The former patriarch, Gregory III, had long been in exile and, in any case, the sultan was wary of a unionist bishop since he continued to fear that the Greek Christians

might collaborate with the West against the Ottoman state. For this reason he sought out Georgios Scholarios, now the monk Gennadeios, who had been taken as a slave at the time of the fall of the city. Mehmed offered him the patriarchal throne; after some consideration, Scholarios accepted. Although not at the time ordained a priest, he was quickly ordained and then enthroned as Gennadeios II (January 1454), not in Hagia Sophia (which was now a mosque), but in the church of the Holy Apostles. The sultan, just like the emperor before him, took part in the ceremony and handed the patriarch his staff of office. Significantly for the future, the Orthodox Christians of the former emperor had found a rallying point in the person of the patriarch and the Orthodox church.

This situation was, of course, in part a result of the overall Islamic view of the world and the Ottoman system of administration. Theoretically at least, the Ottoman Empire was based on Islamic sha'ria (law) which viewed only Muslims as full members of the community. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Muslim tradition clearly recognized the rights of the various peoples of the book, including all Christian groups, and held that they were to be governed essentially by their own religious leaders, in this case the bishops. The *millet* system therefore encouraged the maintenance of the ethnic Christian groups that had already developed in the Byzantine period, for example, the *millet-i rum* (Orthodox Greekspeaking peoples), Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian Orthodox *millets*, independent *millets* for the Armenians, and the non-Orthodox Jacobites and Copts.

Thus, within the Ottoman Empire the role and the power of the Orthodox church were, if anything, increased as a result of the conquest. The clergy was not subject to taxation, the organization of the church remained unchanged, and the hierarchy enjoyed considerable prestige. Indeed, the bishops and the patriarch now had additional responsibilities, since they were major political, as well as religious, leaders and they had an interest in ensuring the stability and success of the Ottoman regime. This encouraged the church to be politically conservative and to support the status quo. In addition, the church had come to symbolize for the Orthodox people of the Balkans the glory and the tradition of the Byzantine Empire. The empire had obviously disappeared, but the church retained not only the culture of Byzantium but also – and probably more importantly – a political structure that assured its own preservation and the maintenance of an institution closely associated with Byzantium. This had important repercussions as far as the heritage of Byzantine culture was concerned. That culture had always been infused with Christian meanings and

interpretation, but alongside that Byzantium always had a strong practical and secular tradition, one that could even be called anti-clerical. This secular tradition in Byzantine culture was less than useful to the educated clergy who dominated the higher offices of the church, and it was therefore not stressed and perhaps even suppressed. Hence the perception of Byzantine culture that continued into modern times has been dominated almost exclusively by religious considerations, so that Byzantium has consistently been seen – even today and in both East and West – as a society that was thoroughly and fundamentally religious.

The Ottomans wished to place the Slavic churches within the Ottoman Empire under the authority of the patriarch in Constantinople, to mirror the control of the sultan over the whole of the empire. In reality, however, a tradition of ecclesiastical independence had already grown up among the Orthodox people outside the Byzantine Empire, which they were unwilling to give up. They naturally retained their own languages, liturgy, and literature, and their bishops were politically independent of the patriarch of Constantinople. In any case, from the eighteenth century onward, and in the context of the emergence of national consciousness, such an arrangement provided significant advantages.

Russia

In Russia, of course, the situation was unique, in part because the new political center of Moscow lay far beyond the control of the Ottoman state, and there were important points of friction between the two powers, first in the Black Sea, and ultimately at the point of contact at the northwestern extremity of Ottoman power in Europe, in Romania, Ruthenia, and Byelorussia. As we have seen, the conversion of Russia to Christianity came from Byzantium, and until the very end of the empire, most of the metropolitans of Kiev and All Russia were Greeks. In the fifteenth century the Russians exhibited some independence when the grand prince of Moscow rejected Isidore of Kiev because he accepted the union of Florence, and they eventually elected a metropolitan on their own, loyal to the Orthodox tradition.

After the fall of Constantinople, the grand prince Ivan III married Zoe Palaiologina, the younger daughter of Thomas Palaiologos, in 1472. Zoe, known to the Russians as Sofia, thus brought a close connection between the last imperial family of Byzantium and the ruling family of Russia, and indeed some Russians had been speaking for a time about the mantle of Constantinople

passing on to Moscow. In the early sixteenth century the monk Filofei of Pskov wrote that the two Romes (Rome and Constantinople) had fallen and that Moscow had become the third Rome. This was viewed by contemporaries in apocalyptic terms as prefiguring the end of the world, and the Russian aristocracy never adopted the idea that Moscow had taken on all the ideology of Byzantium. Nonetheless, there were many ways in which Russians could see themselves as the heirs of the Byzantine imperial tradition and the protector of the Orthodox people who lived under Ottoman control.

In 1547 Ivan IV, grandson of Ivan III and Zoe Palaiologina, was crowned tsar in a ceremony modeled on that of Constantinople, but it is significant that, unlike Slavic rulers such as Symeon of Bulgaria, he made no move to call himself emperor of the Romans, but rather styled himself tsar of all the Rus, and he sought formal recognition of his coronation from the patriarch of Constantinople. The patriarch in this case, Joasaph II, sanctioned the elevation, but only on condition that the actual coronation be performed by a representative of the patriarchate (something that was never done). In 1589, in fact, the patriarch Jeremias II traveled to Moscow, and the tsar (Boris Godunov) suggested that he abandon Constantinople and take up permanent residence in the nearby city of Vladimir. Jeremias declined this offer, but he agreed to the elevation of Moscow to the rank of a patriarchate and the enthronement of the bishop Job to that position. This event had considerable significance in the enhancement of the role of Moscow in the Orthodox world and it was often seen as a restoration of the Pentarchy (the system of five patriarchs), Moscow replacing Rome, which had strayed from communion with the other Orthodox churches.

Thus, in many significant ways the two major poles of the Byzantine heritage were the patriarch of Constantinople (and to a lesser degree the bishops and other patriarchs who were nominally under his control) and the grand prince, and later tsar, of Russia. Each of them had powers of their own and both derived strength and inspiration from the Byzantine tradition; neither was, however, devoted to the restoration of the Byzantine state, for practical and ideological reasons. A major difference between the tsar and the patriarch, of course, was that the patriarch of Constantinople was a subject of the sultan, while the tsar of Russia was independent. This, in fact, had more serious ramifications because in the Balkans the Ottoman conquest had resulted not only in the elimination of the Orthodox Christian states, but also in the essential disappearance of the former aristocracy, who had served as the major patrons of Byzantine culture. They

were replaced, of course, by an Ottoman aristocracy that was almost completely Muslim (see the exceptions below) and that supported institutions and projects connected with Islam. Both the Russians and the institutional Orthodox church often acted as powerful patrons, forces of unity, and beacons of hope for a “better day” on behalf of the heirs of the Byzantine tradition.

The Continuation and Development of Byzantine Culture

This is not to say that many elements of the Byzantine tradition did not survive during the Ottoman period: architecture is perhaps the best example, even though the Christians of the time did not normally have the resources to build monumental churches and other structures. Thus, the marvelous mosques of Sinan (1489–1588) and the other master architects of the sixteenth century can certainly be described as continuing the Byzantine tradition of monumental construction in the service of God. Sinan was born of Christian parents in Asia Minor near Kayseri (ancient Caesarea) and he was taken into the Ottoman army via the *devRirme* (system of conscripting young boys) and converted to Islam. In the army he demonstrated his keen abilities and architectural talent and went on to construct some of the most magnificent structures of the Ottoman period, including (among his more than 300 known buildings) the Selimiye mosque in Edirne (Adrianople) and the Sülemaniye complex in Istanbul, which was made up of the main mosque, surrounded by religious schools, a soup kitchen, a hospital, an asylum, a public bath, and a hospice for travelers. Sinan’s architecture, although done in the service of the sultan and Islam, was a direct continuation of the Byzantine tradition, with its towering domes and arcades, and vast interior spaces decorated with complex and colorful patterns. Christian buildings of the time were normally built on a more modest scale, although important churches survive from the period, especially in the monasteries.

Likewise, post-Byzantine painting also carried on the trends begun in the Byzantine period, primarily in churches and monasteries. Art historians have singled out two major traditions existing well before the fall of Constantinople which may be called the Cretan and the revived Macedonian schools of painting. Both of these continued after 1453, the latter already divided into subgroups, roughly along regional or, arguably, national lines. The Cretan school was a more unified tradition which was increasingly influenced by Italian art, in part

because Crete was controlled by Venice and a prosperous Venetian aristocracy there supported painters. Among important painters of this school were Michael Damaskenos, Gorgios Klontzas, and Emmanuel Tzannes. Theophanes the Cretan (Theophanes Strelitzas, d. 1559) was probably the greatest member of this school, and his student Domenikos Theotokopoulos gained fame and attention in the West as El Greco (ca. 1541–1614). Theophanes worked primarily on Mount Athos and Meteora and his paintings are characterized by tall, lean, austere figures. These same characteristics can be seen in the paintings of El Greco. After the fall of Crete to the Ottomans in 1669 many painters fled to the Ionian Islands, where the Cretan tradition survived but slowly declined.

Thus, after the fall of Constantinople, the Cretan school combined the traditions of Byzantium with new techniques and models from the West, whereas the Macedonian school stressed, perhaps somewhat rigidly, the retention of Byzantine subject matter, style, and methods of painting, especially as it had been carried out by the artists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These revisions of more traditional depiction came to dominate post-Byzantine Orthodox painting in Russia as well as throughout the Balkans in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the most influential of these painters was Dionysios of Fourni (in Thessaly), who worked in the mid eighteenth century.

Among the most important institutions that assured the survival of the Byzantine tradition were the monasteries. To be sure, monasteries had existed throughout the Byzantine period and always played an important role in economic as well as political, religious and intellectual life. They became even more important after the fall of Constantinople, in part because the monasteries were among the very few Byzantine institutions that survived intact, and as *waqfs* (religious foundations) they were generally given the full protection of Ottoman law. Many also received special privileges – normally remission of taxes or confirmation of landholding – from individual sultans. Thus, monasteries maintained, and often increased, the substantial landholdings they possessed, and they frequently engaged in trade and other economic activities. They also served, to a certain degree, as intellectual centers, given that there were essentially no non-Muslim institutions of higher learning in former Byzantine territory and that learning generally fell to a low level.

Figure 16.1 Panagia Lactans. A fine example of a post-Byzantine ikon which exhibits a strong western influence, particularly from Italy. Venetian cultural

influence was strong and, especially in places such as Crete and the Ionian Islands, it was influenced by both Byzantine and western traditions. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



The monastic life did provide individuals – men and women alike – with an opportunity for administrative responsibility and activity that was difficult to find in the secular world, and some of the more talented people naturally gravitated there. Likewise, since they were often wealthy, the monasteries were able to serve as patrons, especially for architects and painters and thus, to a certain extent, they made up for the disappearance of the Christian aristocracy in the Balkans and Asia Minor.

Figure 16.2 Last Judgement, from Vatopedi monastery, Mount Athos. Scenes of martyrdom and the Last Judgement, depicting the punishment of the damned (shown on the viewer's right) and the rewards of the saved (on the left), were very popular in the post-Byzantine period, especially in monasteries. This representation is from the exonarthex (the outer entranceway) of the main church of the monastery of Varopedi on Mount Athos. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (Ploutarchos Theocharides).



Certainly the most important of the monastic establishments of the post-Byzantine world were those on Mount Athos. These flourished and grew, and the Ottoman era represents their efflorescence. The same could be said of the monasteries of Meteora in Thessaly, and elsewhere. Both Athos and Meteora were made up of a number of essentially independent monasteries that could occasionally work together on common causes, and they preserved the unique characteristic of Byzantine monasticism, which stressed the physical proximity of several monastic communities and independent anchorites who lived side by side in essentially the same wilderness. Other monasteries throughout the Balkans also prospered under the Ottoman Empire, and their importance was increased by the fact that, as under Byzantine rule, bishops were commonly chosen from among the ranks of the monks, who not surprisingly often maintained close ties with their former monasteries.

Figure 16.3 Detail from the Last Judgement. This is a detail from another scene of the Last Judgement, from the sixteenth century, in the church of Voreonet in Romania. This section of the painting depicts the fate of the saved, characterized by King David in the center of the composition, playing a lute, while an angel pulls the soul of an individual in the form of a child from a dead man's mouth. In the bottom right one gets just a hint of the torments in store for the damned. The artistic tradition of this fresco is derived from the Macedonian school, which was faithful to the Byzantine tradition. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Among the reasons for the survival of the Byzantine tradition are the social and economic changes that accompanied the decline of the Ottoman state from the late seventeenth century onward and the creation of local aristocracies in the Balkans, some of whom were Christian and who looked to Byzantium as the origin of their culture. In the countryside, this was based on large-scale landowning and/or warfare, in the islands and in cities such as Thessaloniki, Odessa, and Alexandria it was the result of commerce and shipping, while in Constantinople there developed a small Greek-speaking aristocracy. These individuals often had humble origins, and they frequently imitated western and Ottoman culture, but at the same time they provided important economic support for elements of the Byzantine tradition such as church building and decoration. The Phanariotes, as the elite in Constantinople were called (from their homes near the patriarchate in the Phanar (lighthouse) quarter of Constantinople), came partly from the city itself, but also from among the Hellenized peoples of Romania and Albania. They served as diplomats and interpreters, and in this capacity they often exercised considerable influence and power. Ultimately the Phanariot families gained control of the Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, which they ruled essentially as viceroys of the sultan.

As has often been pointed out, the elements of post-Byzantine culture may be separated into two layers, that of formal (higher) culture and that of popular (or folk) culture. The line between these is frequently blurred, but the distinction may be a useful one, and it is possible, once again, to see a significant difference between Russia and the Balkans in this regard. On the one hand, the Russian acceptance of Byzantine culture, which was mostly characterized by religion, has often been seen as a singularly unfortunate event for the Russians, largely because – so it is argued – they came to accept the elements of Byzantine religion ready-made (as it were) and already characterized by a rigidity that was enforced both by the power of the Russian state and by an unbending and unthinking acceptance of the Orthodox tradition. Such a characterization is certainly wrong and blatantly unfair, in part because it fails to take into account the many ways in which the Russians modified Byzantine tradition to suit their own needs. Nonetheless, some aspects of Russian culture were certainly dominated or at least powerfully influenced by Byzantine elements. As already mentioned, there is little reason to imagine that Russia accepted a role as the “third Rome,” but its culture was profoundly affected by the liturgy, which permeated every aspect of life and brought Byzantine literature and spirituality to people at all levels of society. This led to Russians looking at many things from an eschatological perspective which was only one of the ways in which the Byzantines saw the world.

In the Balkans, in part because the institutions that supported higher culture had largely collapsed, the Byzantine tradition was continued by the church (and the monasteries) and as a result much of Byzantine culture was either “ecclesiasticized” or descended into what we would probably call folk culture. Thus, the languages spoken in the Balkans continued to develop, just as they had under Byzantium, and phenomena such as festivals or fairs, attitudes toward the supernatural, and music and poetry continued to be essentially Byzantine in character. Only in Venetian-dominated Crete, with its own tradition of aristocracy until 1669, did self-consciously literary developments take place, with poetry such as the *Erotokritos* of Vitsentzos (Vincenzo) Kornaros.

In the late eighteenth century, partly as a result of the Enlightenment, the Byzantine heritage acquired a political face, both in Russia and in the Balkans.

Box 16.2 Kornaros and *Erotokritos*

Vitsentzos Kornaros (1553–ca. 1617) was born near Sita in western Crete, the son of a Venetian-

Cretan aristocrat. He moved to Candia (now Heraklion) and held various government positions, including inspector of health during the plague of 1591–3. He became a member of the Academy of the Peculiar, a literary society founded by his brother.

Kornaros was probably the author of the long verse novel, the *Erotokritos*. This product of the so-called Cretan Renaissance is an important work in its own right, but it also provides a significant bridge between the literature of the Middle Ages and that of modern times. The *Erotokritos* draws inspiration from the popular chronicles and romances of Byzantine literature, but is also strongly influenced by western literature, such as the French novel *Paris et Vienne* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The poem has over 10,000 lines, but the story (derived largely from the French abovementioned novel) is simple. Erotokritos, the adopted son of a king, falls in love with the princess Aretoussa, but their relationship is forbidden by the social conventions of the day. When the king learns about the situation, he exiles Erotokritos. The young man, however, aided by magic intervention, is able to aid the king in an especially difficult battle, thereby gaining possession of his love. Kornaros is able to bring this banal story to life through his vivid use of language, lively dialogue, and rich references to folk traditions. The following is a brief extract depicting the moment at which the two lovers are parted:

She was speaking on one side [of the window], he on the other; the same suffering gripped them both, one pain, one storm. No longer had they time to speak of their misfortune; the dark moment came when they had to part. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled in the west when he opened his lips to say good-bye, and the place shook from the pain it felt when they held hands and said good-bye. Who can describe how the young girl stood there dazed at that moment and how the young man looked? They had no mouth, no lips to say good-bye, no eyes to see nor ears to hear. But time was pressing; the day had come, and full of passion they pressed each other's hand. And a great marvel happened to that window; the stones and the iron bars wept at that moment, tear-drops rolled down from the stone and the iron; Aretousa found them there and they were warmer than blood. But time was pressing; Erotocritos left with a bitter sigh that shook the land. Arete was left alone with Phrosyne and then a dreadful thing happened: she fell and swooned on the lap of her nurse, not knowing if she were dead or living. (Constantine A. Trypanis, *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 492–3)

The Byzantine tradition, and especially the political ideology of the Byzantine Empire, was seen by some as a call to war with and/or independence from the Ottoman Turks. Naturally this same heritage could be used by others, especially in the church, to recommend obedience to the Ottoman state. Perhaps ironically, among those who sought the overthrow of the Turkish yoke, the Byzantine tradition was used to create two very different visions of the future: the first and most common was the replacement of the Ottoman Empire with what was essentially a revival of the Byzantine Empire, dominated perhaps by the Phanariotes, but multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with Constantinople as its center. This was, for example, the view of Regas Feraios and some of the Phanariotes themselves. By the early part of the nineteenth century this view had been largely replaced by one that stressed the connection between Byzantium, the individual Orthodox churches, and a concept of nationhood that had developed almost entirely in Western Europe. In this view, Byzantine tradition

could be used to help define various national groups, in part by fixing the circumstances of their conversion to Orthodox Christianity, and these groups, as nations, could be seen as having a natural right to an independent existence. Naturally, the creation of what were essentially national churches in the Byzantine period aided the acceptance of this idea. Thus, perhaps ironically, the Byzantine tradition could be used to support both the idea of a multi-ethnic state and that of national self-determination, although the latter view certainly won out and has been an important part of the political history of the Balkans and Eastern Europe for the past two centuries. It should be pointed out, however, that this idea has very little direct connection with Byzantium itself, which certainly did not view itself as a nation in the modern sense and was – as we have seen – fully multi-ethnic and, in many ways, tolerant of different cultures.

The Heirs of Byzantium

The Greeks, Russians, Armenians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Serbs, and other Orthodox peoples, both in their own countries and in the international diaspora, are the direct cultural heirs of Byzantium. They have all been, in one way or another, intensely aware of that heritage and its role in making them who they are. Modern commentators, both within and outside the Orthodox church, have seen the Byzantine historical tradition as separating Orthodox Christian peoples from their powerful neighbors in Catholic or Protestant Western Europe on the one hand, and from the Muslim Turks and Arabs on the other. The attitude of the heirs to the Byzantine tradition has often been ambivalent, since Byzantium is sometimes seen as medieval (which of course it was, chronologically) and backward (which it was not); modernizers have often argued that the Byzantine concern for religion has prevented the Orthodox people from taking advantage of technological and other developments of the contemporary world and that this opens them up to ridicule from more “advanced” cultures. One sees this tendency clearly in Greece along the faultlines between *Hellenismos* (based on the classical tradition) and *Romiosyne* (based on the Byzantine tradition).

Indeed, in the Orthodox areas there is, not surprisingly, an acute awareness of the superiority of the modern West – in technology, wealth, and military power – and a rarely spoken fear that the reason that Orthodox countries have not “developed” in the same way is because of Byzantine tradition. Westerners, of course, have often been happy to encourage this kind of thinking, in part as a

result of anti-Byzantine attitudes that have characterized the West for the past 1,000 years. Indeed, one does not have to look far in contemporary politics and journalism to find the term “Byzantine” associated characteristically with all that is “wrong” with the Balkans and Russia.

The direct heirs of Byzantium are torn in this conflict of ideas, for they are often ready to agree with their critics that their Byzantine heritage (often associated with stale religious traditions, backwardness, and/or autocracy) has held them back. On the other hand, Byzantine culture clearly survives in the cities and villages that were once part of the Byzantine Empire (and increasingly in the diaspora), and ordinary people often feel closely and personally attached to it. Further, eastern Christians can often detect in the strident words of contemporary westerners the specter of the Crusades, especially the sack of

Box 16.3 *Byzantium and The Brothers Karamazov*

One of the first places where the ordinary modern person is apt to encounter Byzantine civilization is in the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature. The novels, plays, and poems of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn contain countless references to Russian religion and its close connections with the religion of the Byzantine Empire. The omnipresence of the village priest and his frequent failure to meet the expectations of a fully Christian life is a commonplace in Russian literature, and the monastery features frequently in important passages. This was true not only of the authors well known in the West, but also in the so-called folk novelists of the nineteenth century who have attracted greater interest in recent decades.

Perhaps most interesting in this regard is Alyosha, the idealistic central character of Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, and his relationship with the abbot Zossima. Alyosha is the youngest of the three brothers and the most sensitive. His mother died when he was only 4 and he grows up in a foster family, far from the crazed world of his licentious, alcoholic father. The first thing Dostoyevsky describes concerning Alyosha is the vivid memory of a single moment with his mother: on a summer evening, with the rays of the setting sun slanting across a room and the ikon of the Virgin with a lamp before it in a corner, Alyosha’s mother is crying and suddenly embraces the young boy. When he is 19, Alyosha decides to enter a monastery, attracted by the personality of the elder Father Zossima. Dostoyevsky describes in some detail the origin of the position of the elder within Byzantine Christianity and its development from the days of early asceticism to the great monasteries of Mount Athos. Father Zossima was a military officer but later joined a monastery. Now he serves as a spiritual adviser and healer whose spiritual power has made him known far and wide. He is personable and affable and those who consult him always come away with happy faces. Alyosha wonders at the faith people have that Father Zossima is able to heal them, but he reasons that the elder is the very manifestation of love and that his example is precisely what is needed to transform the world into one of justice and love among all mankind.

The details Dostoyevsky provides of the role of the elder and his standing in society reflect very much what we know about the role of holy men and women in Byzantium. Likewise, the author

does not discuss the daily round of prayer and fasting in the monastery, but instead focuses on the character of Zossima and, even more, the attitude of the young Alyosha toward him. Zossima is pictured in his role as would-be arbiter in the disputes among members of the Karamazov family and as dispensing good advice to the throngs of pilgrims who come to visit him. Small details, such as Zossima's gift of a small ikon to a woman, the arrangements for Father Zossima's burial, and the debate over whether the bodies of saints remain uncorrupted reinforce the book's connection with Byzantium.

The Brothers Karamazov, of course, focuses on the murder of Alyosha's father and the relations among the three brothers. Its concerns are with the political, social, and intellectual issues of the latter part of the nineteenth century, but Father Zossima stands behind – or perhaps above – the whole scene. An important section of the book is a digression on the elder's earlier life and the personal realizations, triggered by a duel with another officer, which led him to become a monk. Zossima is shown not only as a healer but as a prophet who can foresee the terrible things that are going to befall the Karamazov family, but he responds to everything with wisdom and love, in a way that bring to mind the records of the lives of Byzantine saints.

After Zossima's death the novel goes on to deal with the central issues of the book: moral responsibility and the struggle between faith and reason. But, even though Dostoyevsky's feelings on these issues are quite clear, his use of symbols (such as the repeated image of individuals bowing down and almost embracing the earth) and his negative portrayal of many of the religious authorities leave many of the answers ambiguous, in a way that would have been attractive to Byzantine thinkers. This is not to say that the main focus of *The Brothers Karamazov* is Byzantium: it is not, but a careful reading of the book (and many others) can provide a useful insight into the nature of the Byzantine tradition.

FURTHER READING

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Constantinople in 1204 at the hands of their Christian brethren. In a way that most westerners cannot imagine, the memory of the Crusades and the attendant “colonization” of most of the Byzantine Empire are still very much alive, and the Byzantine tradition is the one thing that separates them from the negative aspects of the western tradition.

Figure 16.4 Assumption Cathedral in Zagorsk, Russia. The ecclesiastical architecture of Russia naturally followed that of Byzantium closely, also taking into account native and western traditions and the demands of the severe Russian winter. The Assumption Cathedral was built in the sixteenth century and is the final resting place of the tsar Boris Godunov and his family. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.

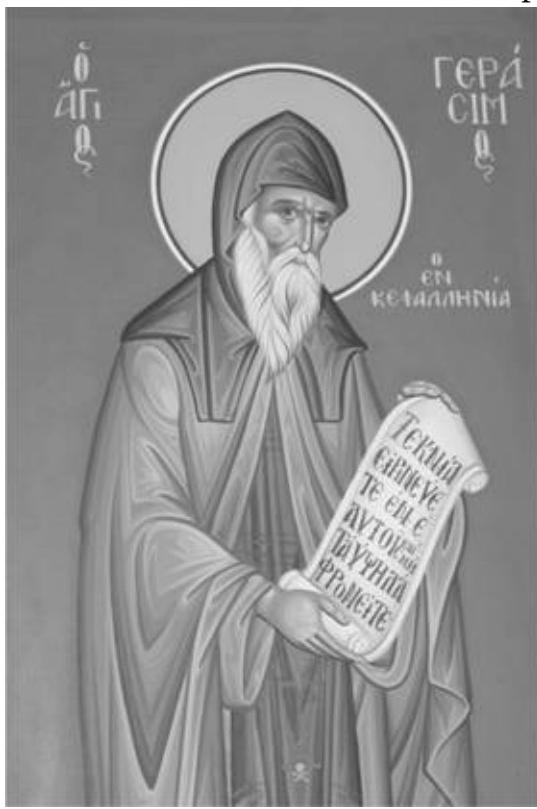


This is not to say that more recent events have not played a role here as well. Eastern European communism was able, for its own ends, to dismiss religion while embracing the concept of the Byzantine Empire as part of its tradition. In addition, the experiences of the Balkan wars at the beginning of the twentieth century, the terrible intercommunal clashes during and after World War II, and the events associated with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the 1990s have all influenced the ways in which Byzantium and the West are viewed. Some western commentators have argued, for example, that the Balkans are inherently unstable and that ethnic violence in this region is so great as a result of the religious divisions that go back to the Middle Ages and the period of the Ottoman Empire. As the events described in this book have shown, however, nothing could be further from the truth. The reality of Byzantium (as opposed to the western perception of it) was not of instability or exclusivity, but rather of stability and inclusiveness, inclusiveness of a kind that had no place, for example, for either wars of a crusading nature or efforts at ethnic cleansing, both of which are very far from the Byzantine tradition.

The peoples of Russia and the Balkans are not, of course, the only heirs of Byzantium. In significant ways all of modern western culture has been strongly influenced by Byzantium, both in the historical contributions that it made to the development of the West (phenomena such as the blending of Christian and classical culture, the preservation of classical Greek literature and learning) and

the creation of significant cultural achievements in its own right. In addition, the peoples in proximity to Byzantium might also be considered rightful heirs: the Turks, the Albanians, the Arabs, and, to a significant degree, even the Italians. The Arabs and the Turks are special cases in point since the culture of the Arabs developed alongside and in concert with Byzantine culture, while that of the Turks has been influenced in many ways by Byzantium in its last centuries and the years of afterglow. It should not come as a great surprise that Byzantium shares many elements of its culture with its two great adversaries.

Figure 16.5 Modern “Byzantine” fresco. In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, church art in former Byzantine areas was dominated by imitations of western art, rather weak attempts to produce fashionable, realistic depictions of Christ and the saints, with colors and styles drawn mainly from Italy. From the 1970s onward there was a conscious revival of the Byzantine tradition by artists who sought to reproduce its style and technique. At its best, this revival produces some impressive pieces of art, although there is a tendency to careless repetition and a mass-produced feel to the work. Among artists participating in this revival are Theophilos Chatzimichael, Fotis Kontoglou, Yiannis Tsarouchis, and Panos Papanakos. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Beyond this, the history of the Byzantine Empire can (and, I think, should)

provide a valuable mirror for the West: Byzantium is the “other” Europe, the other face if you will, of Western civilization, helping the West see better what it is and what it is not. Byzantium is the alternative West, showing how things might have turned out differently for Western Europe had circumstances been different, and providing valuable lessons of ways in which the European tradition itself can be seen and turned in different directions. The study of the Byzantine Empire can thus provide someone who is not a direct cultural heir of the empire with a different way of understanding the West (meaning, here, the western tradition, of which Byzantium is unquestionably a part), a way that requires, if nothing else, enlarged definitions of what the West actually is. This is extremely important as we ask ourselves about the role of technology in our culture, about the dehumanization that seems a universal part of a globalized world, and about the direction and fate of institutions such as the European Union. In general, those who weigh these issues tend to see things in bipolar terms: that the future should be one way or another, and that individuals and institutions must be either for us or against us, which in a fundamental way is simply another way to say that East is East and West is West. Yet, the history of Byzantium shows that this is not the case: there are (at least) third ways, middle ways, indeed a whole world of ways, and alternate ways of thinking and acting are very much a part of our common human heritage that we should both treasure and use as examples for emulation and/or avoidance.

George Ostrogorsky did not end his still standard *History of the Byzantine State* by exulting with Leakey that Byzantium fell to the Turks, its inhabitants “wrangling about theology until the end.” Instead, he took a very positive view, arguing that Byzantium had performed a crucial historical service, preserving the culture of classical antiquity until the West was ready to receive it. Although I agree with Ostrogorsky about the importance of this phenomenon in general terms, I think that the significance of Byzantium is not primarily in what it preserved but in what it created, and most importantly in the rich set of (often quite contradictory) ideas and principles it espoused: a society that was remarkably religious and yet surprisingly secular, almost always at war but with a clear preference for negotiation and diplomacy; that respected learning but where most people were illiterate; eschatological but at the same time remarkably practical. And the list can go on. The creation of apophatic (or “negative”) theology and the concept of *oikonomia* go against the standard view of Byzantium as a culture dominated by narrow-minded monks and petty court officials. Rather, characteristics such as playfulness in painting and architectural

design, sophistication in philosophy and science, and a varied tradition of saints (and saints' lives), from the women who dressed in monks' clothes to Symeon Stylites, demonstrate the breadth, depth, and richness of Byzantine culture and society.

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